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Reading as social practice

The Beyond the Book research project

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Beyond the Book (BTB) is a trans-Atlantic collaborative interdisciplinary research project that analyses mass reading events and the contemporary meanings of reading in the UK, the USA and Canada. This article gives an overview of the origins, aims, scope and methods of the project.

Beyond the Book (BTB) is a trans-Atlantic collaborative interdisciplinary research project that analyses mass reading events and the contemporary meanings of reading in the UK, the USA and Canada. The project was conceived in late 2002 and designed in mid-2003 by myself, a British North American Studies scholar with a humanities training in literary studies, based in the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Birmingham, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, an American who works at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada as a communications scholar and who trained as a social scientist.¹ In autumn 2005, thanks to a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the BTB team expanded and we were joined by Dr Anouk Lang, who has a literary studies training and a particular interest in Canadian and Australian modernist literary culture, working as a full-time postdoctoral fellow. At the same time, Anna Burrells, who is completing a PhD in the English department at the University of Birmingham, became our part-time administrative assistant. Anna also joined us as an active researcher in the participant observation work at the Birmingham Book Festival in October 2006.

1. The exploratory work for Beyond the Book was funded by the Canadian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) Faculty Research Award, which enabled me to spend a month in Canada in July 2003 interviewing publishers of literary fiction in Toronto, meeting the organisers of 'One Book, One Community' in Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, and using the newspaper resources at the Robarts Library. I then travelled east to spend a week working with DeNel. That 2003 research trip helped us to win a British Academy International Joint Activities grant (2004–2007) later that year, which, in turn, facilitated our pilot study in Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge (fieldwork with readers) and Chicago (interviews with organising agencies) in September 2004. Mount Saint Vincent University provided an internal grant for a research assistant for the summer of 2005. Two years of bid-writing culminated in a successful funding application to the AHRC and the award of grant number 112166 in June 2005.

Additionally, the project has involved the labour and support of many people based at the Universities of Birmingham and Mount Saint Vincent, including five research assistants, twelve graduate fieldwork assistants, four translators, and nine transcribers, plus administrative and IT support from more than twenty other individuals. Some detail about the project's aims, scope, and methods will contextualise the size of the team and the roles of its members.

Beyond the Book is a research project that focuses upon mass reading events (MREs): nation-wide reading groups initially inspired by Oprah's Book Club, and the proliferation of shared reading programmes that employ the 'One Book, One Community' (OBOC) model which was initiated by librarians Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi at the Seattle Public Library in 1998. Over 500 of these community-wide reading events are now held each year in a number of countries including Australia, Singapore and the Netherlands, while the broadcast events (e.g. UK TV's 'Richard & Judy's Book Club') can increase sales of featured books by 1000 per cent. While the aims and scale of mass reading events differ, as do the agencies involved, all MREs use mass media to promote reader participation, foregrounding the location of fiction within a contemporary 'matrix of communication', supported by a combination of multinational corporations, publicly funded organisations, independent capital and individual consumers. Understanding the power relations among these agents is central to our analysis of the ways that MREs perform various kinds of ideological work, such as the reproduction of historical discourses of reading as a 'civilising' activity, the building of community cohesion within urban centres, or the promotion of cross-cultural alliances.

Among myriad issues about shared reading in the twenty-first century that our research project set out to explore, our key concerns can be summed up by these questions: Why do mass reading events cause people to come together to share reading, and do these events attract marginalised communities, foster new reading practices, enable social change? As these research questions imply, BTB examines reading as a social practice rather than privileging the investigation of reading as a hermeneutic or interpretive practice (while recognising that these practices are imbricated: shared reading is also, in part, an interpretive process of re-reading). Designing research methods which could investigate shared reading practices within an event-based framework required drawing upon the directors' research expertise in textual and empirical methodologies – the result of our training in the humanities (Fuller) and social sciences (Sedo). We developed mixed methods involving qualitative interviews with event producers, focus groups with event participating and non-participating readers, participant observation of activities, analysis of media coverage of events and

of the publicity materials produced for them, and the collection of quantitative data through a trilingual online questionnaire (in English, French and Spanish) that we adjusted for use in each site. Our fieldwork focused on 10 sites across three nation-states.² Recognising the cultural specificities that inflect class, race and gender formations and attitudes to literary culture, we decided to undertake context-specific case studies of reading events. We chose sites either because we were familiar with the local print cultures in the selected locations, or because of their significance to the OBOC 'movement', or to establish a range in the scale of events and communities studied. The primary research, completed in June 2007, generated over 3000 questionnaire responses, 56 focus groups with readers, and over 70 interviews with cultural producers. Analyses of this data inform our critical commentaries about mass reading events and shared reading which have already appeared as articles and conference presentations (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2006; Fuller, 2007; Rehberg Sedo, 2008) and which will continue to be published in journals, books and monographs after the funded phase of the project ends in August 2008.

Guiding our project design was our commitment to feminist standpoint epistemology, which, in terms of research process, advocates a continual 'back and forth' movement between theory and practice (Stanley and Wise, 1990). Feminist standpoint theory also emphasises the importance of beginning analysis from your research subjects' own accounts of their everyday lives (e.g. Code, 1991; Smith, 1987). Within BTB, this means that we use the readers' and cultural workers' own articulations and analyses of their shared reading practices and event experiences as a starting-point from which to analyse the cultural work that mass reading events perform and enable. In doing so, we are also seeking to understand and to analyse dominant and subordinate knowledge; that is, knowledge created, informed by, and sometimes resistant to, the ruling relations of power (Smith, 1987; 1990). This epistemological approach to the study of shared reading enables us to identify and theorise the ways in which readers negotiate the meanings of reading within the contemporary 'matrix of communication' (Long, 2003). Within this matrix, the mass media possess tremendous symbolic power, while the more traditional ruling relations of power, represented by educational and governmental institutions, for example, lend particular social meanings to shared reading that do not always coincide with reader experience.

2. Our research sites/selected mass reading events are: (Canada) – Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge 'One Book, One Community'; Vancouver Reads; Canada Reads; (USA) 'One Book, One Chicago'; 'One Book, One Huntsville'; 'Seattle Reads'; (UK) 'Great Reading Adventure' (Bristol); Birmingham Book Festival; 'Richard & Judy's Book Club' (Channel 4 TV); 'Liverpool Reads'.

Central to the research project, then, was a desire to attend to the agency of all parties involved in the design, delivery and consumption of mass reading events. Along with our colleagues in related reading studies projects, such as 'Devolving Diasporas', we share an intellectual interest in exploring how readers outside the academy encounter, re-encounter and share books. Even at the initial design phase, however, we wanted our research to be of use to cultural workers as well as to fellow academics in various fields (particularly, cultural studies, book history, sociology of culture, literary studies). Producing statistics via our quantitative work, for example, offers us a language which can assist the practitioners (librarians, community activists, reading event organisers) whom we have met during our research. Statistics about what people read and why help them to make a case to funders and policy-makers, for whom qualitative data is useful, but not easily translatable into dollars and pounds. To that end, we have continually tried to communicate our preliminary analyses via short reports (an example is posted on our website at www.beyondthebookproject.org); consultation meetings with organising agencies (e.g. OBOC organising committees or members thereof in Chicago, Liverpool and Huntsville) and related organisations (e.g. the UK's Reading Agency); presentations to practitioners (e.g. the public librarians' professional conference at North York, 2005; the 2007 Canadian Library Association conference); and an involvement in continuing professional development (e.g. Reader Development Day, Scottish Centre for the Book at Napier University in June 2008). I claim no originality in our research practice or politics by offering these examples of knowledge exchange: many feminist scholars within humanities and social science would also understand these communications as integral to their work as feminists. Indeed, this shared commitment and philosophy was borne out by the research and practice presented at our conference, 'Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading' held at the University of Birmingham between 31 August and 2 September 2007.

'Beyond the Book': the conference

Driving the organisation of the conference was a desire to bring together academics of reading studies (who worked within and across a wide variety of disciplines) and practitioners. We envisaged the conference as an opportunity for researchers and activists to share their knowledge and expertise, to meet and to discuss their ideas, concerns and experiences within a friendly atmosphere, to reach a better understanding of each other's work, and maybe even to be inspired into dreaming up new and future research projects. We also wanted

to showcase the socially transformative projects begun by some of the cultural workers we had met as a result of our multi-site fieldwork. Hence, we decided that while each morning would consist of parallel sessions of three-paper panels, each afternoon would be spent in plenary session, and we invited a range of practitioners to participate in two panels entitled 'Reading and/as Social Change' and 'Creating Communities of Readers'. These plenary sessions produced lively and sometimes provocative discussion. The first panel showcased projects about reading groups in prisons, Get Into Reading (which featured in a major *Guardian* article by Blake Morrison, 5 January 2008), Literature for All of Us (Chicago), and a cross-border One Book One Community project in Northern Ireland. Discussion about the challenges involved in these projects and the role of reading as socially transformative on both an individual and collective level were focused and detailed. Subsequent to our conference, Jane Davis of Get Into Reading visited the Literature for All of Us team in Chicago. It is exciting to have played a role in facilitating the beginnings of an exchange between these two award-winning projects, and gratifying to know that the conference actively facilitated new working partnerships.

At an early stage of planning the conference we were fortunate to win the commitment and support of Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long, whose scholarship was foundational for the BTB team's own research work. Janice Radway opened the conference with a stimulating and well-illustrated presentation entitled 'Bridget Jones, Girls' Zines and the Problem of the Future: Gender, Narrative and Subjectivity in the Nineties'. The lively discussion session which followed began three days of open, enthusiastic and intellectually engaged dialogue among all participants. Professor Radway (sponsored by the British Academy) also chaired a parallel session, 'Reading, Retelling and Retailing the Romance', took part in the discussions which arose during various sessions and, along with fellow keynote speaker Elizabeth Long, spent much time talking with participants during coffee, lunch and dinner breaks. Their efforts were much appreciated by all delegates, with many participants commenting in the round-up session on the importance of their attendance given the ground-breaking work undertaken by both in the fields of reading studies and feminist research methods. Many people who attended the conference consider Professors Radway and Long to be the key inspirations for their work and were excited to be afforded an opportunity to meet them. Their intellectual and social generosity made an important contribution to the comfortable collegial environment of the conference.

That environment was sustained and enhanced by all the conference participants, who together provided a fascinating and multi-faceted programme. Over 120 scholars and practitioners from 19 countries came to the University

of Birmingham, representing a cross-section of disciplines including English literature, anthropology, sociology, education, African-American studies, linguistics, performance studies, criminology, library science, publishing studies and cultural studies. Over the three days, the topics covered ranged from the circulation of urban fiction among women in US prisons to the effect of blogging on the dissemination of poetry, and from projects using reading to assist in recuperation from brain surgery to online Chinese time-travel romances. The quality of the papers was extremely high and many conference-goers commented on this, as well as praising the generous and supportive atmosphere of intellectual exchange, and the stimulating nature of the multi- and inter-disciplinary discussions and viewpoints on reading and reading cultures represented. Fortunately, and thanks to the efforts of several experienced academic editors who participated in the conference, some of the research which was presented at 'Beyond the Book' will reach a new and extended audience through a series of print and online publications.³

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3. A collection containing papers from the conference, entitled *Reading the Readers: Communities, Practices, Transformations*, is being edited by Anouk Lang. Other collections from the conference are being published in special issues of *Particip@tions: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* (online at www.participations.org), edited by Martin Barker, November 2008; and *New Review of Children's Literature & Librarianship*, edited by Sally Maynard.